

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: December 9, 2011

Agenda Item: Bison Translocation to Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Reservations

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final Approval

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 60 minutes

Background

In 2005, FWP and APHIS established a bison quarantine facility to begin a five-year research program: the Quarantine Feasibility Study. The study was aimed at determining if bison could be kept free of brucellosis, a bacterial disease that causes miscarriages in cattle, bison and other wildlife. If, at the completion of the program, the remaining bison were found to be brucellosis-free, the cooperating partners would then considered offering bison to tribal and non-tribal organizations. Although the bison would be considered brucellosis-free, the quarantine protocol calls for continued testing for five years to absolutely verify success.

In 2010, after a Request for Proposal procedure, the first cohorts of study bison were moved from the Corwin Springs facility to the Green Ranch and an agreement was negotiated with its owner, Turner Enterprises Inc. FWP's decision to place 87 study bison at the Green Ranch is being challenged in a lawsuit. Those 87 bison have since grown to a total of 143 bison. FWP believes it is prudent to relocate those bison, if possible, to public or tribal lands for the remainder of the monitoring period.

The final cohort of 68 bison remaining in the quarantine facilities also are in need of translocation. At the Jan. 13, 2011 FWP Commission meeting, the commission asked FWP to move forward to identify and analyze potential interim sites where bison could be held until completion of a statewide management plan. FWP evaluated numerous sites for interim placement of bison, and analyzed four in depth – Spotted Dog WMA, Marias River WMA, Fort Peck Reservation, and Fort Belknap Reservation.

Public Involvement Process & Results

An EA analyzing the potential for the translocation of bison to four different sites was released on Sept. 15 and was open for public comment through Oct. 19. Three public meetings were held: in Deer Lodge (Oct. 5); in Shelby (Oct. 6); and in Glasgow (Oct. 17). Attendance at these meetings was 116, 111, and 154 respectively. FWP staff also met with 11 citizens in Chinook on Oct. 17. In all, 3,373 written comments were received, plus a petition against bison at Spotted Dog WMA with 607 signatures. There was strong opposition by neighbors, livestock producers, local governments, and sportsmen to the two proposed WMA sites. There was strong opposition to the tribal sites by neighbors, but strong support by the Tribes and some bison advocates. A summary of public comment is attached.

Alternatives and Analysis

Alternatives considered included “no action,” which would leave the bison where they are; and translocation to any or all of the four locations analyzed.

- Leaving bison at the Quarantine facility is not recommended because of space limitations and cost. Keeping bison at the TEI Green Ranch, per the agreement with TEI, ensures disease-free bison will be available for restoration purposes should they be needed following completion of the statewide conservation plan, although there is some public opposition to the agreement terms whereby TEI is allowed to keep 75% of the offspring.

- There was strong, and nearly unanimous, opposition to interim proposals for translocation to the WMA sites. The opposition was due to concerns about the costs and restrictions required by the quarantine protocol, the interim nature of the proposals, impacts to wildlife that utilize the WMAs, and by neighbors who are concerned about damage to property and livestock if bison escape.
- Most opposition to the Tribal sites was based on concerns about escape from the reservation(s) and potential impacts and damage to surrounding landowners adjacent to the reservation.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

- Based on strong opposition to the interim translocation of bison to the two WMAs, and the restrictions and costs associated with the interim nature of the proposal, FWP recommends the WMAs be withdrawn from consideration for interim translocation.
- Based on the initial commitments described in the quarantine feasibility study protocol, the desire of the Fort Peck and Fort Belknap Tribes to restore genetically pure bison to their reservations, and the ability of the Tribes to manage bison on their lands, FWP recommends that the 68 bison currently in the quarantine facility near Gardiner be translocated to the Tribes. This recommendation is contingent on acceptance of a negotiated agreement with the Tribes that would address, among other things, required brucellosis testing necessary to complete the feasibility study, containment expectations, response if bison escape, and provisions for some of the bison or offspring to be made available to Montana for future restoration purposes.
- FWP also recommends the bison presently being held at the TEI Green Ranch continue to be held there per the terms of the agreement negotiated with TEI.

Proposed Motion

I move the commission approve the translocation of bison to the Fort Peck and Fort Belknap Reservations.